2. Tools for Interpreters

Introduction

Both archeology and interpretation have been part of the history of the NPS from its earliest days. Although their roles and relationship have gone through some changes, they have both contributed to the educational and resource management missions of the NPS. Visitors seek something special when they visit national parks. Interpreters have an important role to play in helping them to connect their interests with the meanings of the resources and to find relevance to contemporary life.

Interpreters have developed many different tools and techniques for encouraging people to care about NPS resources. Interpretation is not just talking to people or presenting information. Interpretive products contain relevant and provocative material and information, and they involve specialized techniques. Flexibility in style, presentation, and method provide a range of options for communicating important concepts about archeology.

Two-dimensional exhibits, such as this one at Great Smoky Mountains NP in the 1950s, exemplified early interpretive endeavors. (Great Smoky Mountains NP, HFC)

Throughout this chapter, when we refer to interpreters, we mean anyone who is seeking to understand and apply interpretive techniques. Archeologists, that means you!

For Your Information

National Standards for Interpretation
These competencies represent the NPS national standards for interpretation in ten benchmark areas of interpretive work. They stand as a goal to foster interpretive excellence nationwide in NPS areas, at every stage of an employee's career. Refer to them as you set a course of action for developing as an interpreter.

Interpretive Development Program Competencies
The Interpretive Development Program identifies essential "Benchmark Competencies" for all interpreters in Ranger Careers positions. Volunteers and partner organizations can also use the specific competencies that apply to their work.

Interpretive Equation and Techniques

The Interpretive Equation is a quick formula to help an interpreter remember basic concepts that relate to all interpretive activities. By applying this simple equation to any interpretive activity, an archeologist can move the visitor from an attitude of caring little about a resource toward an ethic of stewardship.

$$(KR + KA) \times AT = IO$$
(Knowledge of the Resource + Knowledge of the Audience) x Appropriate Techniques = Interpretive Opportunities

Let's examine each of these elements in turn to understand why all four are important when developing and presenting effective interpretations of archeological resources:

Knowledge of the Resource (KR)

Knowledge in interpretation involves more than rote facts about the archeological resource. Rather than reciting non-controversial "safe" facts packaged in a bland, one-dimensional presentation, archeological interpretation should discuss human values, conflicts, ideas, tragedies, achievements, ambiguities, and triumphs. Interpreters must identify and be aware of the many different intangible and universal meanings the resources represent to various audiences. They must be knowledgeable about past and contemporary issues, as well as the condition of the park and its archeological resources. Keep in mind that balanced KR keeps visitors actively thinking and learning in interpretive situations.

Knowledge of the Audience (KA)

Archeologists conducting interpretive programs should be aware of the audience's time, physical capabilities, and pre-existing knowledge. They must understand issues of sensitivity. Interpreters typically encounter many different kinds of visitors in their audiences, including:

- Educational groups

- Families

- Extracurricular activity groups

- Subject matter experts

- Physically or mentally challenged persons

- Organized tour groups

- Specialized tour groups

- Persons of diverse cultural backgrounds

Each of these visitor groups may have unique characteristics, interests, and needs. For example, elderly visitors may require seating or student groups may have limited time. Consult with other archeologists and interpreters, particularly at your park, to develop presentations that meet the needs and interests of specialized visitor groups.

Be aware, however, that your audience numbers more than those individuals who actually set foot in a park. Consider these other park "visitors":

- Web surfers

- Classroom program participants (teachers, students, school administrators, families)

- Readers of books or other informational material

- People talking together about a park experience

Interpreters should realize that any random group of visitors will contain people representing diverse interests. Balanced KA recognizes and respects the diverse levels of interest, motivation, and understanding of park visitors and constituents; it incorporates a balance of multiple perspectives that encourages people to think about and develop their own stewardship values. Each visitor is interested in a park for one or more specific reasons:

- For recreation

- For "trophy hunting" (interpreters should recognize, manage, and educate visitors who may potentially vandalize or otherwise damage archeological resources)

- For nostalgia, refuge from the present or isolation

- For information or to gain knowledge

- To make connections and linkages to his or her own experience

- To act as a steward or patron of a park's resources

The most effective interpreter will discover and address his or her audience's varied needs and interests.

The **"visitors' bill of rights"** should guide each interpreter to recognize and respect the specific personal values and interests visitors associate with archeological resources. Whether visiting a park on-site or off, visitors have a right to:

- Have their privacy and independence respected

- Retain and express their own values

- Be treated with courtesy and consideration

- Receive accurate and balanced information

The interpreter's tasks are to ensure that visitors have a positive experience at any of these levels and to help visitors reach a deeper and richer level of understanding. No matter who a visitor is or how much is known, the interpreter should strive to give something of value to take home.

Knowledge of appropriate techniques (AT)

Interpreters have many techniques available to them. Determining which technique or techniques are most appropriate for a visitor group results from assessing the resource themes and the audience itself. The interpreter should never choose a technique without first identifying the theme, goals, objectives, and the prospective audience to determine if it is an appropriate "fit." Whichever technique is chosen, interpreters should ensure that it addresses the tangible/intangible/universal linkages of the resource. Interpreters must stay current on communications and delivery techniques and new media possibilities, and use them appropriately. Interpreters must regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the techniques used, and replace and update them when they no longer achieve the desired outcomes. Use of a variety of appropriate media and techniques provides multiple opportunities to access the meanings of resources and in turn encourages the greatest number of people to become personally involved with park resources.

Case Study

Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site
Several opportunities exist at the Knife River Indian villages for visitors to be exposed to archeology at the site and its contributions to knowledge about the past:

- Self-guided walking tours for three historic village sites

- A visitor center with museum

- A 15-minute orientation film that provides the visitor with an aerial view of the earthlodge rings and tells the story of the Hidatsa people that lived there

- A furnished Hidatsa earthlodge behind the Visitor Center

- Eleven miles of trails through natural areas and cultural sites

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For Your Information

The World Wide Web has become a dynamic means for sharing archeology with the public. The web allows researchers, travelers, and browsers to access information about many NPS resources. An increasing number of visitors come to parks with a good deal of background knowledge, much of which they may gain through the web. Or, the web may be the single source of information for people who do not physically visit a park. Therefore, it is important that archeology interpretation has an online presence that is clear and engaging so virtual visitors may also have enriching experiences.

For Your Information

Training opportunities:

Servicewide Training Announcements
Take advantage of a myriad of opportunities in the NPS for broadening your knowledge, skills, and abilities!

Harpers Ferry Center Interpretive Media Institute
HFC offers training programs and an online evaluation guide. Use these tools in the process of evaluating and refining interpretive endeavors.

Try it Yourself

Several NPS training modules are designed to help interpreters to develop interpretive techniques:

Module 102: Demonstrating Successful Informal Visitor Contacts
This module enables an interpreter to properly assess visitor needs, select among alternative responses, provide basic and in-depth information, and recognize and provide opportunities for a visitor to make intellectual and/or emotional connections with the meanings of the resource.

Module 103: Preparing and Presenting an Effective Interpretive Talk
This module combines the many skills and techniques required to be a competent public speaker with the philosophical interpretive base built in Module 101.

Module 210: Prepare and Present an Effective Conducted Activity
This module provides opportunities for interpreters to gain competency in preparing and presenting conducted activities that generally provide visitors with more opportunities to encounter tangible resources.

Module 220: Prepare and Present an Interpretive Demonstration or Other Illustrated Program
This module trains interpreters to effectively integrate illustrations and narrative in programs that provide opportunities for the public to connect with resources, and conduct an effective illustrated program that relies primarily on a demonstration.

Module 230: Effective Interpretive Writing
This module seeks to provide a framework for professional development as an interpretive writer. It defines interpretive writing as a continuously evolving skill of the professional interpreter, provides guidance for creating written products, and offers developmental suggestions.

The Interpretive Opportunity (IO)

The IO enables the interpreter to put it all together. An interpreter must be proficient in as many techniques as possible, and should ensure that his or her program addresses interpretive themes through as many different techniques as are appropriate to provide interpretive opportunities to the widest possible array of audiences.

The IO involves a string of moments that display your knowledge, preparation, and awareness of the audience and your park. Interpreters are in a powerful position. They influence people's ideas and by allowing emotions to come into play, encourage new ways of looking at new materials. The IO provides a stage for you to present your ideas about the resources and transform people's thinking about them.

The effect of the interpretive opportunity may not be immediately apparent to either the interpreter or the visitor. Interpretation may have both a long-term and/or a short-term effect. Interpreters should not always expect to see an immediate reaction in the visitor.

For Your Information

Interpreters find some methods and interpretive opportunities work better than others on the basis of their own skills and preferences as well as the audience. Your colleagues said:

> "I like a good conversation more than just about anything and an interpretive moment is like a good conversation."

> "Visitors learn about and understand some of a site's meanings [from off-site], but a personal connection is more easily formed by experiencing the site itself."

Try it Yourself

What are some of the audiences that visit your site? What kinds of audiences do interpreters encounter?

How might your techniques change for an audience of subject matter experts? A third grade class? A group of Elderhostel visitors?

The Interpretive Process Model

The Interpretive Process Model provides a course of action for developing interpretive opportunities. It helps to find ways to present resources to the public and communicate the kinds of ideas and perceptions that encourage people to care about them. Visitors are prevented from feeling protective of archeological resources by the space they perceive between themselves and this seemingly unknowable, inaccessible specialization. The Interpretive Process Model helps archeologists to see these spaces and start visitors on their way to filling them with ideas, opinions, and feelings.

1. Select a tangible place, object, person, or event that you want the audience to care about.

Tangible resources include objects, places, or people that relate to larger messages about events at a place. A program might focus, for example, on a single artifact but intend for the audience to also wonder about the people who used it, where it was found, and its historical context. Similarly, an interpreter might use a specific artifact to represent the material culture of a particular time and the people who created and used it.

Alibates Flint is a tangible resource.
(Alibates Flint Quarries, NM)

While an interpretive product or service may include several tangible resources, usually one tangible resource acts as an icon or symbol. The icon provides a starting point and reference for an exploration of associated tangible resources and multiple resource meanings. It anchors a presentation so interpreters can reveal a constellation of ideas, values, relationships, contexts, systems, and processes. An interpretive tour usually focuses on a different object or feature at each stop to explore a unique meaning or meanings. Sometimes an essay or talk uses two or more icons to describe multiple perspectives regarding the same topic. The more icons an interpretive product uses, however, the more complicated the development and delivery will be. Be aware that as a consequence it may be harder for the audience to follow and stay engaged.

For Your Information

The case studies in this section will walk you through the Interpretive Process. The **Case Study** box will tell you about each step of the process for the Alibates Flint Quarries National Monument. The **Use What You You Know** box will guide you through developing answers for Mesa Verde National Park. **Try it Yourself** in the third box for each section by applying that step of the process to your own work.

Be sure to write out your answers – you will use them as you continue through this course.

Case Study

Alibates Flint Quarries National Monument
Alibates Flint, distinctive for its varied coloration, occurs in dolomite outcrops atop Permain Aged Redbeds in the Canadian River breaks near Amarillo and Fritch, Texas. This special kind of flint is the tangible resource.

Use What You Know

A corn cob from Mesa Verde National Park illustrates the concepts introduced in this section. It will start you on the way of learning to apply the process.

Try It Yourself

Choose an icon/tangible resource from your park to apply the concepts in this section. Describe its physical characteristics.

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2. Identify intangible meanings.

Tangible/intangible meanings are the basic building blocks of interpretation. Each tangible resource has an incredible variety of intangible meanings. The more Knowledge of the Resource (KR) and Knowledge of the Audience (KA) an interpreter has, the more meanings can be linked to the tangible resource to expand the significance held by its physical attributes alone. Without the stories that go with it, a corn cob at Mesa Verde is only a corn cob. Concepts such as beauty, ceremony, life, and social activity bring meaning to the resource. Meanings can be obvious and popular or obscure and controversial. Interpretation in this way links a tangible resource to broader intangible meanings to make its importance apparent, accessible, and relevant to more people.

Audiences wish to connect on a personal level to the subject and/or resource. Connecting experiences occur when the tangible resource is linked to some larger intangible meaning in a way that the audience can relate to and that provokes understanding and/or appreciation. Sometimes this occurs through their intellectual understanding of context, insight, discovery, and revelation. Other times emotions open the way—enjoyment, sensation, spirit, renewal, empathy, wonder, challenge. Intangible meanings speak to different people in different ways. Only when the tangible/intangible link is personally relevant does an individual connect to the resource.

Use What You Know

The intangible meaning of the corn cob at Mesa Verde relates to the system of agriculture used by the Ancestral Pueblo people.

What other intangible meanings can you think of for the corn cob?

Try it Yourself

Brainstorm at least a dozen intangible meanings that can be associated with the tangible resource you chose. These meanings, connected with the tangible resource, are its tangible and intangible links.

What can you interpret with this tangible resource? What processes, ideas, relationships, concepts, and values might it meaningfully represent?

3. Identify universal concepts.

Universal concepts are intangible meanings that are relevant to almost everybody. They are powerful vehicles that reach many people in significant ways. Like all intangible meanings, universal concepts can be linked to a tangible resource. Facts alone can make visitors feel disconnected from the past – "So what?" Just as facts alone may leave a visitor cold, universal concepts can be presented in too abstract and abrupt a way. For example, visitors care little about the facts and events at Bloody Lane on Antietam National Battlefield without universal concepts such as death or fear. But if the concepts are discussed without photographs, artifacts, and testimonies they are harder to feel as having really happened. Another way to approach the interpretation is to describe the events in terms of the ways that officers and soldiers maneuvered, stumbled, and fought. The significance of tangible resources, such as equipment or other evidence of technological contributions in warfare, to the results of the encounter makes more powerful impressions of both the tactics and the horror of war. Universal concepts, joined with other tangible/intangible links can provoke a desire to understand and appreciate intangible meanings that might otherwise seem inaccessible.

Case Study

<u>Alibates Flint Quarries National Monument</u>
Universal concepts at the Alibates flint quarries include survival, nourishment, use of resources, aesthetic beauty, and quality of life.

Use What You Know

Some of the intangible meanings or universal concepts of the Mesa Verde corn cob include family, community, time, and religion.

What other universal concepts can you think of to bring meaning to the corn cob?

4. Identify the audience.

All audiences who want to visit or read about a site seek something of value for themselves. They all expect something special. Each visitor has a personal sense of what the place means. Many know a great deal about the resource, some know what family or friends have told them, and others simply assume the resource contains something worthwhile.

The meanings audiences ascribe to the resource have a great deal to do with the success or failure of interpretation. Expert audiences require different approaches than general audiences as do children, seniors, or international visitors. Of course, an interpretive product can meet any combination of those audiences as well as many more.

Some sites have formal visitor surveys and demographic information available. All interpreters, during the casual conversation that often offers itself before a program begins, can benefit from asking visitors what the resource means to them. Find out what the audience seeks by asking questions such as, "What brought you here today?" "What did you expect to find?" "What do you hope to gain here?" "What do you hope your children will take away with them?" "What do you think about when you look at this place?" "If you had my job, what would you tell people?" A visitor who says archeological sites are places for spiritual renewal, solitude, and self-understanding requires a significantly different program than one that feels that sites are places for collecting arrowheads. An interpreter who thinks about and records these conversations can use them to identify tangible resources that address these audience meanings and create interpretive products that use those meanings to provoke new connections to the meanings of the resource.

5. Write a theme statement—include a universal concept.

Interpretive themes are tools for developing an idea or ideas in order to inspire connections. An interpretive theme is not a message as much as it is a relevant point that encourages new thoughts and feelings. Other qualities of themes include:

- Being single sentences that express meaning

- Linking a tangible resource to its intangible meanings

- Organizing interpretive products

- Linking a tangible resource to a universal concept

In the past, interpreters and supervisors were advised that the success or failure of an interpretive product could be easily measured by the audience's ability to state the theme. This led to products where the theme was constantly repeated with the hope that the audience would be able to parrot the message. A theme is not a refrain, a sound byte, or a "take home message." Products organized in this manner generally fail to develop an idea cohesively over the course of the delivery.

Today, we think differently. A well-presented program based on a solid interpretive theme will likely provoke connections the interpreter did not anticipate and may never become aware of. No one in the audience may be able to repeat exactly the interpreter's theme but the focus should be clear and most people's versions will be related and recognizable. Thematic statements increase visitors' ability to understand the significance of tangible and intangible resources in their own lives. They create threads of meaning between the resources, or a path visiting each one.

Crafting an interpretive theme takes care, time, and editing. It often takes several drafts of both the theme and the product for the interpreter to become clear about what to say and how to say it. We'll delve more deeply into thematic interpretation in the next section.

Case Study

Alibates Flint Quarry National Monument
Selected primary interpretive themes:

> The broad distribution and long and diverse history of use of Alibates flint (dating almost to the earliest evidence of people in North America), and the story of the Plains Village Culture associated with the area foster appreciation of the surprising richness and sophistication of early cultures.

> The story of quarrying and using Alibates flint offers unique opportunities to explore the inherent human need to make and use tools to improve the quality of life.

> The history of people using Alibates flint exemplifies the powerful human drive to combine practical functionality with aesthetic beauty in everything we do – even in crafting common, utilitarian objects.

Use What You Know

The tangible meaning, intangible meaning, and universal concepts surrounding the Mesa Verde corn cob are linked in this theme statement:

> The corn represents a community of people with skills, appreciation of beauty, and spiritual beliefs.

Try linking some of your answers together to form theme statements for the corn cob.

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6. Use interpretive methods to develop links into opportunities for connections to meanings. Illustrate the theme statement.

A well-written theme statement allows an interpreter to choose tangible or intangible links that illustrate or express the theme. But by themselves, links don't provide opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource. Links must be developed into opportunities for connections to meanings in order to present the resource in a compelling and evocative way.

There are many ways to develop a link into an opportunity for an emotional or intellectual connection to the meanings of the resource. Stories, explanations, quotes, activities, demonstrations, examples, evidence, illustrations, questions, and discussions are just some of the methods interpreters use. Success depends on the link, the theme, the interpreter's KR and KA, style, and the purpose of the interpretive product.

Sam H. Ham, a noted authority on interpretation, suggests an interpretive product develop no more than five main points. This is probably good advice. Five developed links won't overtax the audience but will provide the interpreter with plenty of material to provide opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource.

Some of the links should be intentionally developed to provide opportunities for emotional connections and some for intellectual connections. An interpreter needs to plan specific opportunities that are intended to inspire or provoke feelings like awe, wonder, sympathy, curiosity, amazement, regret, grief, and anger. Other specific opportunities should provoke insight, understanding of context, discovery, and reveal relationships.

Case Study

Alibates Flint Quarry National Monument

Alibates Flint Quarry National Monument provided an opportunity to form a connection by participating in the release of a brochure "National Parks of Texas" about the wide range of vacation options available in national parks and historic sites state-wide.

The idea for the brochure grew from the realization that many Texans and out of state travelers alike are unaware of the full range of possibilities for fun and learning within the National Park Service sites of Texas.

The free brochure includes descriptions of each park's distinctive attractions. Travel possibilities include investigating 10,000 years of archeology at Alibates Flint Quarries National Monument. The monument can only be viewed by ranger-led guided tours. Groups of twenty-five or less are recommended. The tour involves a leisurely walk up a moderately steep trail that is covered in loose gravel in places. During the two-hour tour, visitors learn about the flora, fauna, and cultural history of the area.

The brochure provides preliminary interpretive material to the public. It draws on the tangible and intangible meanings of the site to draw visitors to learn more through on-site programs.

Use What You Know

Let's say that a group of senior citizens will attend a special program about agriculture at Mesa Verde. Take the universal concepts and form a theme statement that you think responds to the needs of the audience.

7. Use a theme statement to organize opportunities for connections and cohesively develop an idea or ideas.

The best way to reveal meaning is through the exploration of an idea. To be relevant and provocative an interpretive product must cohesively develop an idea or ideas over the course of its delivery. A meaningful idea captures, organizes, and sustains the attention of the audience. A meaningful idea provides opportunities for audiences to make their own connections to the meanings of the resource. Without the cohesive development of a relevant idea or ideas, products are merely collections of related information or haphazard arrays of tangible/intangible links—they are not interpretive.

Opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource provide the architecture for a cohesively developed idea or ideas best when sequenced with effective transitions and arranged to support a well-crafted interpretive theme statement. The next section will guide you through identifying and using thematic interpretation.

Case Study

Alibates Flint Quarry National Monument
Selected statements of significance:

> Alibates flint is a beautiful distinctive, workable, multi-colored stone with excellent edge-holding properties. These characteristics prompted various North American peoples to quarry, shape, and use this stone to construct tools that were critical to survival: projectile points, knives, scrapers, axes, drills, awls, and many others.

> Alibates Ruin (inside monument boundaries) and the nearby Antelope Creek Site comprise the type-site for the Antelope Creek Phase of the Plains Village Culture (circa A.D. 1150-1500), one of a number of cultures to benefit from the quarries. These sites include architectural remains, petroglyphs, and more than 1.5 million collected objects. This collection comprises about 800,000 of these objects.

Also look at this article, which discusses the history of archeology at the Quarries: Antelope Creek Phase.

Use What You Know

The meanings and thematic statement for the Mesa Verde corn cob can be shaped into interpretive programs for the park. Build on the thematic statement by linking it with a next step:

The corn represents a community of people with skills, appreciation of beauty, and spiritual beliefs. The program illustrates this with a description of agriculture, other skills, and religious practices.

Thematic Interpretation

Interpretive themes pull together multiple meanings of park resources into a story for people to explore. Thematic interpretation begins with resources and ends with a comprehensive program of interpretive offerings. It cumulatively builds on the significant meanings of the park and explores why its resources make it one of the best places to explore them.

Universal concepts are essential components of both primary interpretive themes and subthemes. Universal concepts are powerful because in just a word—love, family, war, honor, education, sacrifice—so many different meanings are instantly accessed. They are effective in interpretation because they enable a wide range of people with diverse life experiences to become engaged in a place, in a program, or in an exhibit.

Keep in mind that universal concepts are most effective and useful when they are more than just broad words. Context is also an important consideration that should not be overlooked when developing interpretive theme statements. We've adapted the discussion of these topics from the 2003 NPS Intermountain Support Office Theme Guide to explore thematic interpretation.

Primary Themes and Subthemes

Interpreters find that thematic interpretation draws out provocative and powerful stories from resources. Interpretive themes operate at two levels: as primary interpretive themes and subthemes. Primary interpretive themes are the overarching, biggest stories about the place. Subthemes are the smaller stories that nest within the primary interpretive themes.

Characteristics that are common to both levels of interpretive themes include the following:

- All interpretive themes are based on the significances of park resources.

- All interpretive themes are the cores of stories used to explore the multiple significances of the park's resources to the public.

- All interpretive themes connect park resources to the larger ideas, meanings, beliefs, and values of which they are a part.

- All interpretive themes contain universal concepts, allowing a wide and diverse range of people to all find personal paths of connection to the stories of the place.

- All interpretive themes provide opportunities for people to explore the meanings of the place, without telling people what park resources should mean to them.

Interpretive themes are best stated as single sentences that include tangible and intangible elements. Don't state interpretive themes as topics, which tends to organize a body of work but is too ambiguous to provide focus.

Developing Primary Themes

Primary interpretive themes communicate the most important values of the park's resources to the public. They translate factual significance statements into overarching park stories and may be the first elements that people associate with the park. Primary interpretive themes form the foundation of the park's interpretive program, but are grounded on the park's values.

Primary interpretive themes are best written as single sentences. Although primary themes are based on park significance statements, there need not be a one-to-one relationship between statements of significance and primary interpretive themes. However, the set of primary theme statements must represent the entire set of resource values. It is important to identify as many resources available for interpretation as possible, and stating themes to link everything together is an important step.

Sometimes interpretive opportunities address one, or even all, of a park's primary interpretive themes. But when that is the case, the treatment is necessarily introductory in nature (such as a park brochure or general park video), and leads visitors to other services and resources.

Developing Subthemes

Subthemes are the driving elements in the development of specific interpretive services—the actual activities or media available to visitors. Since effective storytelling moves from the specific to the general, interpreters move from the introductory uses of primary themes to subthemes to help visitors connect with a significant aspect of park resources.

Subthemes are narrower than primary themes in scope and deeper in their treatment of the particular aspects of the resources. Like primary interpretive themes, subthemes link tangible resources to intangible ideas and meanings, and include universal concepts to increase interpretive effectiveness.

Subthemes are valuable because they allow specific interpretive services to achieve greater depth. They enable interpreters to guide visitors through the exploration of more subtle and complex aspects of specific park resources. This allows understanding at a more sophisticated level, and helps visitors extrapolate their new knowledge from the specific to the general.

Developing Interpretive Services from Subthemes

When a program is organized around a theme that links a tangible resource to a universal concept, the links must be developed with interpretive methods into opportunities for connections to resource meanings. Those opportunities must be intentionally sequenced to elaborate the theme's idea. Each opportunity builds on previous opportunities and provides the audience a chance to learn or feel differently. The effect of the arrangement is cumulative and articulates and explores the meaning of the interpretive theme statement.

Interpretive services are always developed from interpretive themes to ensure a direct linkage stays intact from resource values to the story format of primary interpretive themes to the depth and focus of subthemes. Consciously building an interpretive service around the framework of a well-crafted primary interpretive theme also prevents the desired outcome of the service from being overshadowed or deflected by interpretive medium, technique, or personality. Exploring meanings remains the central goal — and maximizes the value of the interpretive service toward fulfilling the mission of interpretation.

Ideas for specific interpretive services flow from interpreters' familiarity with park resources. Initial inspiration may spring from many sources: an often-asked question, a dramatic viewshed, a new discovery, etc. Regardless of origin, the design and presentation of every interpretive service must be driven by the strategic decision to tell a story that provides opportunities for people to explore meanings.

The following two examples of park significance statements and primary interpretive themes are taken from the 2003 edition of the NPS Intermountain Support Office Theme Guide:

Petroglyph National Monument

Set of Significance Statements

- Petroglyph National Monument contains one of the largest concentrations of petroglyphs in North America and represents an extensive record of peoples for whom we have few written records.

- The monument has outstanding research potential because the petroglyphs are numerous, have retained their integrity, are an outstanding example of Rio Grande style, and are close to other associated archeological resources.

- Places in the monument have traditional and cultural importance to Southwestern American Indians and Atrisco Land Grant heirs.

- The largely unexcavated Piedras Marcadas Pueblo ruin is one of the largest pueblos of its time period in the Rio Grande valley.

- The monument's natural and cultural landscape (escarpment, volcanic cones, and surrounding open space) and long vistas are major elements that define Albuquerque's western horizon and provide opportunities to experience contrasts with a growing urban environment.

- The geologic resources of Petroglyph National Monument (tectonic rifts, cinder cones and lava flows, and dramatic erosional features) facilitates both an understanding of the formation of the Rio Grande Rift and how natural landmarks have been recognized by and influenced a number of cultures.

- Because of the historical significance of the land base in the proximity of a major urban area, Petroglyph National Monument provides a unique opportunity to interpret the divergent and convergent historical events and cultural viewpoints of the Puebloans and Europeans (Spanish) that led to conflict and resolution.

Set of Primary Interpretive Themes

- The rich concentration of petroglyphs and the associated cultural landscape at Petroglyph National Monument, recognized as important by the native peoples of the mid Rio Grande Valley and others, offer opportunities to contemplate the meaning of cultural continuity in our world of accelerating change.

- This geologically active area, formed by rifting, volcanism, and erosional forces including the Rio Grande and its tributaries, has attracted people for thousands of years and powerfully influenced their lifeways, traditions, and beliefs — exemplifying how landscapes shape and influence human societies.

- The symbols connected to this place — petroglyphs, land grant deeds, Christian crosses, livestock brands, and inscriptions — provide opportunities to explore the ownership, control, and use of land, resources, identity, and ideas in the ongoing history of the American Southwest.

- The continuity of the Atrisco Land Grant from 1692 to the present provides an opportunity to understand 300 years of land grant ownership in the face of an ever-changing urban landscape and continued use by the heirs of the original Spanish settlers.

Colonial Dorchester State Historic Site
<http://www.discovercarolina.com/html/s04history102.html>

Set of Significance Statements

- The village of Dorchester is a remnant of the global process of European colonization and exemplifies, in microcosm, many elements of colonial and revolutionary era life in South Carolina.

- Extensive historical records exist for Old Dorchester, adding tremendous integrity to the site.

- The village site has maintained a high degree of archeological integrity, and in the process provides us with extensive documentation of life during the period 1690 to 1780. It is one of the most intact and protected colonial town complexes in South Carolina.

- Old Dorchester State Historic Site is one of the few ongoing archeological projects open to the public in South Carolina. Here visitors can observe daily investigations, a source of ongoing discoveries.

- The fort and village are significant for their association with the American Revolutionary War. The fort is one of only a handful of surviving fortifications remaining in South Carolina that were occupied by both British and American troops.

- The fort at Old Dorchester is a tangible reminder of the anxiety and insecurity that the French and Indian War created among colonial South Carolinians.

- The fort at Old Dorchester is the largest, best preserved, and most complete tabby fortification in North America.

- Old Dorchester documents an important relationship between Anglicans and Congregationalists in colonial South Carolina.

- Old Dorchester signifies an important link in the migration of Congregationalists from England to Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Georgia.

- In the time period that Old Dorchester's church bell tower was built, few existed in South Carolina; this bell tower signifies the relative affluence of the Old Dorchester populace.

- The oldest continuing schoolboard in America has its roots in Old Dorchester.

- Old Dorchester, located at the furthest inland navigable point on the Ashley River, served as a strategic commerce center in colonial South Carolina.

Set of Primary Interpretive Themes

- The social, political, economic, and religious forces that framed the founding and evolution of colonial Dorchester provide opportunities for us to explore how communities survive and prosper through human interdependence.

- The ongoing investigation of colonial Dorchester's cultural resources provides interactive opportunities to understand how archeological and historical investigation help us to learn from our past.

- The Anglican bell tower standing in a community that was founded by Congregationalists is emblematic of the dynamic relationship among the various religious groups of colonial Dorchester.

- The fort at colonial Dorchester, built as a response to the French and Indian War and adapted for use in the Revolutionary War, exemplifies the need of communities to ensure the safety of their members.

Use What You Know

What are the primary themes and subthemes that archeological research at your park has addressed?

Use your theme statement to organize the opportunities for interpreting your resource into a sequence that cohesively develops the relevant idea or ideas stated in the theme. Plan effective transitions to move from one opportunity to another.

Material Culture and Public Interpretation

Tangible evidence of the past impresses people. It makes the past seem more real than history books or television shows can. Having artifacts to show and illustrate gives a sense of authenticity to a place that people seek when they visit parks. Icons focus people's ideas and feelings—it can seem easier or more manageable to experience an idea through the senses than by rolling it over intellectually.

Archeologists use intriguing objects such as this engraved tooth to "hook" their audiences. (FOVA)

Material culture is an essential component and product of archeological research. In interpretation, it is a vehicle to explain the archeological process. Remains from the past evoke curiosity and excite imagination. It can be a launching point for people to make their own interpretations from evidence and form their own ideas. Frequently, tangible resources make ideas more accessible and can create a sort of language for communicating about the past and its context in modern life.

Archeology provides important information and material remains to park interpretive programs. Archeological resources occur in virtually every unit of the national park system and are critical to understanding and interpreting the past. They include sites, materials found in museum collections, the records associated with these sites and materials, and interpretive media such as museum exhibits, web sites, public programs, and publications. These resources are often fragile and may be easily destroyed unless proper attention is paid to their management.

Use What You Know

Think about the material and human resources available to enhance your interpretation. Will you interpret from an ongoing excavation or can you take visitors by an area undergoing compliance survey? How can the setting, the other actors/excavators, the artifacts, reports, and maps act as material culture and as props to give meaning? If you are interpreting information from a past excavation, what park resources can you use to enhance your program? Were artifacts found that are particularly significant in obvious ways to the past of the area? Can you incorporate less obviously significant artifacts into the presentation to support the major meanings and themes?

Many archeological presentations display artifacts without giving them meaning. Exhibit cases, for example, lined with poorly or unlabeled artifacts cannot convey any depth of information about how and why past people made, used, and discarded the artifacts. Similarly, an archeological interpretive program that fails to present an artifact's context only presents the minimal amount of information to the public without eliciting intellectual and emotional responses. Archeologists and interpreters should work together to go beyond mere description when interpreting archeological resources for the public.

Case Study

Archeology at Andersonville
This web page highlights how archeology addresses questions about Civil War prisoner of war camps, exploring how the issue of fair and ethical treatment of POWs continues to be an issue around the world today.

Archeology at the Battle of Little Bighorn
What really happened at the Battle of Little Bighorn? No white settlers survived to tell their side and the perspective of the Native Americans who fought and delivered a stunning defeat to the troops led by General George A. Custer was discounted. Archeological research investigates the material remains of the battle and interprets the relationship with the modern understanding of what transpired there.

Natural Resources Interpretation

Archeological interpretations include the influence of ecology, environment, and nature on culture, and people's influence on their surroundings. The Natural Resources Division method of interpretation provides another viewpoint on discussing parks with visitors. The division practices the axiom "through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection." It endorses the following four-step strategy:

1. **Define what is the natural resource topic or issue.**
   The first step involves determining what the issue is that needs to be addressed by interpretation. Critical resource issues generally involve subjects that possess traditional park values such as unique character, beauty, rarity, etc.

2. **Determine what is the primary message that needs to be conveyed.**
   The second step asks interpreters to identify the most important issue or message to be conveyed. What is its purpose and desired effect? This step also enables interpreters to recognize the extent of interpretation needed and degrees of public involvement.

3. **Determine what is the most appropriate audience that needs to be reached with the message.**
   The third step finds out how broadly or narrowly to target an audience with particular interpretive devices and topics. Broad-scale issues, such as the relevance of archeology to modern life, may require getting the message out to large, diverse audiences. Specific issues, such as the damage inflicted on archeological resources by local weekend recreationalists, may be most effective through a localized scope.

4. **Determine the most appropriate technique for delivering the message.**
   The NPS uses many kinds of interpretive devices. Whichever ones you choose, keep these elements in mind:

   o   Select a theme.

   o   Use goals and measurable objectives.

   o   Assure relevancy.

   o   Evaluate.

   o   Develop and outline the interpretive device.

With the help of an interpretive ranger, children at a geology day camp in Capitol Reef National Park in Utah contemplate an earlier time and the animal that left its footprints in stone. (NPS)

For Your Information

Why do you want to be an interpreter? One interpreter said:

> "I want to instill that interior value about the environment. I want to touch visitors' lives with meaningful and relevant feelings about nature. And I want to somehow help the environment through education and awareness."

Interpreters can further structure or refine their program using the Natural Resources Communications Decision Tree:

Is it a Subject or an Issue?

(Issues involve problems and solutions, whereas subjects in this case are features or topics independent of problems or threats.)

If it is a subject:

What needs to be communicated?

Why communicate it?

Who needs it?

How?

And: is public enjoyment/appreciation of the park enhanced through resource stewardship attention to this subject?

If it is an issue:

What is the issue?

What is the message?

Who is the target audience?

What techniques are appropriate?

And: Can public enjoyment of the park be enhanced through resource stewardship attention to this issue (e.g. alternative values)?

Case Study

Yellowstone Sand Verbena, Yellowstone National Park
This page gives an example of choosing a natural element and interpreting its significance and relevance to modern life.

For Your Information

Visit the Natural Resources Information Division
Page for more program details. This page is available only through the NPS intranet.

Shenandoah Stories, Shenandoah National Park and Ranger Programs
Learn about ranger stories, happenings, and news. Get a sense of naturalist interpreters' take on communicating with the public.

Natural Resources Year in Review – 1998
Chapter 7 of this report talks about natural resource interpretation. Take a look for ideas and approaches.

James H. Gramann, Protecting Park Resources through Interpretation
Interpreters of natural resources find that people tend to care more about resources through interpretive opportunities. This study by a social scientist goes into greater depth about why it takes place.

A Ranger's Life
Preservation and protection can be dangerous or tedious, cold and really cool, motivational and awe-inspiring. This interpreter shares her thoughts in an essay about personal connections to natural resources.

The Interpretive Analysis Model: A Tool for Assessment

Assessment enables interpreters to reflect on their work. Outcome evaluations must be visitor-based and are both short-term and long-term. Although outcomes cannot always be measured immediately or quantitatively, you still should measure the effectiveness of the various interpretive opportunities offered to the public.

- Evaluations of **short-term outcomes** focus on whether an effective interpretive opportunity was offered to the audience.

- Evaluations of **long-term outcomes** focus on whether the larger NPS mission goals of perpetuating the nation's natural and cultural heritage and promoting a stewardship ethic in the public are met.

- Interpreters must seek **audience feedback** to gauge the effectiveness of the interpretive theme, content, program, etc. An effective outcome is measured by the degree to which the audience forms effective linkages to the archeological resources, not the amount of information conveyed, audience applause, or the personal satisfaction of the interpreter. Focus groups, visitor "report cards," and surveys can measure interpretive outcome effectiveness.

Visitor-based evaluations, however, do not mean that you shouldn't ask for feedback from your professional resources! Park employees draw on a diverse body of professional knowledge. Be sure to ask for help and for suggestions.

Using the Interpretive Analysis Model

The NPS Interpretive Analysis Model provides a way to assess public programs. It supplies a strategy for identifying successful elements in interpretation and appropriate areas for growth.

Use What You Know

Use the questions below to guide your evaluation of the interpretive program you produced in the Interpretive Process Model or of another interpretive product. Decide on the best way to present your evaluation and make sure that it addresses all the questions as they relate to the subheadings.

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1. Identify tangible resource or resources.
    - What places, objects, people, or events are being interpreted?
    - What is the interpretive product or service helping the audience care more about?
    - What tangible resources act as the icon?

2. Identify intangible meanings.
    - Which intangible meanings are present? List the meanings you recognize. Which are universal concepts?
    - How can you involve visitors in the discovery of these intangible meanings?
    - Can you identify any areas of bias in your interpretation?

3. Identify opportunities for connections to resource meanings and the interpretive methods used to develop them.
    - How have you developed opportunities to facilitate connections between the meanings of the resource and the interests of the audience?
    - What specific methods are used?

4. Identify which opportunities favor emotional connections and which favor intellectual connections to resource meanings.
    - What is the functional intent behind the opportunities?

- o How are they used to affect the audience, and what does the interpreter intend to effect in it?
- o Did the program as a whole help the audience feel and think differently about the resource, and how do you know?

5. Identify the cohesive development of a relevant idea or ideas.

- o Does the product have a focus?
- o Is the focus a meaningful idea or ideas, or is it a topic or chronology?
- o Do the ideas you perceive from the program include universal concepts?
- o Does the program develop an idea?
- o Does it say something meaningful about the resource?
- o Is the idea relevant to the audience? How do you know?
- o How did the arrangement of opportunities for accessing the material emotionally and intellectually contribute to the development of the program's central idea?

6. Consider the effect of the product as a whole.

- o What is its effect?
- o Is it saying anything meaningful – not just in isolation at one point in the program but as an understandable and logical whole to someone without pre-existing knowledge of archeology or the resource?
- o Does the product lead the way or does it ask the audience to do the work and create their own story from the links and opportunities provided?
- o Is the interpretive product successful as a catalyst for creating opportunities for the audience to form their own intellectual and emotional connections to the meanings and significance inherent in the resource?
- o Is the product appropriate for the audience?
- o Does it provide a clear focus for their connection with the resource by demonstrating the cohesive development of a relevant idea or ideas, rather than relying primarily on a recital of a chronological narrative or a series of facts?

7. Compare your analysis with the analysis of others.

- o What other people have you identified as resources in the course of creating the program?
- o How does your program and analysis compare with that of other fields or interpreters?
- o How might your experience help others?
- o What have you, or what can you, learn from other archeologists' analyses?

8. Identify ways to improve the product or service.

- o Drawing on the answers to the questions above, what would make your program more effective? How might more opportunities for accessing the material, another approach in style or media, or a different sequence might improve it?
- o Is the central idea holding together?
- o Does the material provide opportunities for connections? Do the tangible/intangible links need editing and rearranging to make the development of the central idea more cohesive?

> **Use What You Know:**
>
> Gather together your answers to the questions in this chapter.
>
> - What are the primary interpretive themes grounded in your park's statements of significance?
>
> - How do themes go beyond a restatement of the facts to include tangibles, intangibles, and universal concepts?
>
> - How do these primary themes meet the desired interpretive outcome of increasing visitor understanding and appreciation of the significances of your park's resources?
>
> - Consider the language of the themes. Are they written for NPS audiences, professionals, the public? Are the themes in phrased ideas or complete sentences?

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